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NATO talks facing up to missile gap

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US Defense Secretary Harold Brown and delegates of seven other NATO allies are busy studying how to counter a growing Soviet nuclear missile buildup against Western Europe.

Reports of the appearance of a new mobile short-range (75 miles) Soviet nuclear missile, the SS-21, with troops of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact in Eastern Europe, added some urgency to top-secret policy talks of the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) here April 24. The NPG consists of the United States, Britain, Canada, West Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Italy, and Turkey.

Defense ministers of all member countries took part, except for Barnett J. Danson of Canada, who faces elections there next month, and

Neset Akmandor of Turkey, who flew home to attend urgent Parliament sessions on Turkey's domestic crises.

Brown briefs delegates

In the base conference hall, which was under 24-hour guard and was swept for electronic "bugs" Secretary Brown briefed delegates and NATO staff, headed by Secretary-General Joseph Luns, in detail on the current balance of US and Soviet strategic forces and on the progress and implications of the expected new US-Soviet SALT II arms-limitation treaty.

The meeting then turned to its main task: finding answers to what one NATO official called "not a sudden imbalance in favor of the Soviets, but some rather disturbing trends."

West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and other European leaders have in the past expressed concern to President Carter over the Soviet SS-20 ballistic missile deployed since 1977 against Western Europe. More than 100 SS-20s, positioned in the western USSR or in Warsaw Pact states, can be fired from rapidly movable launchers — "even from a parking lot," as one Western analyst put it.

Not counted for SALT

Despite its range, believed to be more than 3,000 miles, the SS-20 is not counted as a strategic missile in terms of the proposed SALT II treaty. Europeans are concerned that neither SALT nor any other arms-limitation agreement covers it, but are uncertain what to do about it.

West German Defense Minister Hans Apel has suggested a new arms-control group inside NATO that might permit European participation in any future SALT III treaty talks with the Russians.

This NPG session, the 25th since the group was created in 1967, discussed how to modernize NATO's own "theater nuclear force" of

about 7,000 warheads, delivered by more or less aging short-range missile systems and by bombers and submarines, to counter the SS-20, SS-21, and other members of the growing family of Soviet nuclear weapons.

The delicate political problem for NPG is getting West Germany, Britain, and other allies to agree to place new NATO missiles and other defenses on their territory. The Homestead meeting policy recommendations are to be sent to the May 15 conference of NATO's top-level Defense Planning Committee (DPC). The DPC would have to reach final decisions by year's end, NATO officials said.

The DPC includes all NATO members except France, which has its own long-range ballistic missiles outside NATO control; and Greece, which withdrew from the DPC and other NATO bodies to protest US failure to prevent Turkey's invasion of Cyprus in 1974.

Since anti-ballistic missiles (ABMs) are not deployed by NATO and are severely limited for the superpowers by SALT agreements, NATO's options for countering the Soviet threat to Europe, say defense analysts here, are three: "hardening" some of the most critical of the 600 or so fixed NATO defense sites; making such sites more mobile; or moving them out of the NATO area altogether.

Cruise missiles launched from fixed sites, aircraft, or submarines could be another answer. However, under SALT II the US may be unable to deploy cruise missiles with a range of 600 miles or more and may also be prohibited from transferring cruise missile technology to European allies.

However, US defense officials say the allies have been reassured that the SALT II cruise missile restrictions are short-term ones that would not prevent deployment of certain types of these missiles once they are ready for it.